

# Darker Turn - the state of Thuringia's regional elections (Germany)

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**There were few surprises in the German state of Thuringia's regional elections last Sunday. Polling had long suggested that the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), which already scored 23.4% five years ago, was well-positioned to take first place, and that Die Linke, the party of Thuringia's still highly popular Minister-President Bodo Ramelow and once the leading force in Thuringian politics, would not be able to replicate its previous success. Ultimately, the results proved to be just a bit worse than expected. The AfD performed slightly above expectations, taking 32.8% of the vote and thereby gaining a so-called blocking minority in the state parliament, which would allow it to hinder constitutional amendments. Die Linke, whose polling numbers had been declining slowly but surely since former parliamentary speaker Sahra Wagenknecht split off to form her eponymous Alliance (BSW) last October, came in fourth with 13.1%, less than half of its electorate from 2019, most of which seems to have decamped to Wagenknecht's new formation, whose 15.6% put it in third place, between the CDU and Die Linke.**

The outcome, as mainstream commentators announced with breathless unanimity on Sunday night, represents a political 'caesura': for the first time since the defeat of the Third Reich, a far-right party has won a state-wide election, indicating a profound level of alienation vis-à-vis the political establishment among a wide swathe of the electorate. On the parliamentary level, last week's results will necessitate never-before-seen governing constellations, such as a potential alliance between the CDU and Ramelow's humbled Linke, or perhaps even Wagenknecht's BSW. This kind of triangulation, long the norm in many of Germany's European neighbours, would prove a first for the Federal Republic, and is further evidence that even in the EU's economic core, political business-as-usual is no longer tenable.

The surge for the AfD in Thuringia is particularly remarkable for the fact that its leader, Björn Höcke, is not your run-off-the-mill Muslim-baiting populist *à la* Mario Salvini or Marine Le Pen, but, at least in the eyes of many observers, a dyed-in-the-wool fascist with a penchant for race science and Nazi-esque rhetoric. Yet that does not seem to have worried many voters, who flocked to the party [across demographic groups](#). Although the AfD's vote skewed male, winning 38% of men compared to 27% of women, in other respects the party seems to be breaking new electoral ground for the far right, significantly over-performing among young people and workers. Indeed, had it not been for Thuringia's seemingly left-leaning pensioners, the AfD might have topped 40%.

It's important to note that Thuringia is not particularly representative of the German electorate. With only 2 million residents, it contains a mere 2.5% of the country's inhabitants, and its population is older than that of Germany as a whole. Although unemployment levels more or less align with the national average, structural inequalities – real or imagined – and feelings of having been colonized

and infantilized by the West in the years after reunification, as documented in the work of sociologist Steffen Mau, have created a socio-political terrain that is evidently conducive to xenophobic *ressentiments*.

Of course, it would be reductive to blame the AfD's growing mass appeal on the scars of reunification alone. After all, for decades, the losers of the transition were Die Linke's core constituency, and many continue to vote for Wagenknecht's new party in large numbers. Crucial to the far-right surge is the shift in the political atmosphere since the so-called 'summer of migration' in 2015, when over a million refugees, largely from war-torn Syria, arrived in Germany. Although initially received with open arms, their presence, alongside public sector austerity and infrastructure that – although it could be considered robust by American or British standards – is increasingly atrophied, has allowed social problems to be recast as a zero-sum competition between newcomers and natives. The AfD has effectively paired xenophobic calls for 'remigration' with easterners' inherited distrust of elites in general and western elites in particular. The tone of its campaign – angry, provocative, but not without a hint of millennial post-irony – also gives it an oppositional flair that is particularly appealing to young voters, whom it reaches via social media platforms in numbers the mainstream parties can only dream of.

Having consolidated its strongholds in the East, and still polling at a comfortable 18% Germany-wide, it seems that the AfD is here to stay. The party narrowly missed first place in Saxony, which also went to the polls last Sunday, and is likely to do the same in the state elections in Brandenburg two weeks from now. Particularly noteworthy, however, was [exit poll data](#) on Sunday that shows voters increasingly turning to the AfD *not* as a protest vote, but because they regard the party as most capable of representing their interests on issues like (reducing) migration, fighting crime, and – crucially – keeping Germany out of the war in Ukraine, an issue that Die Linke, for whom opposition to NATO was long a key programme plank, has effectively ceded to the far right (Ramelow now repeatedly expresses his support for weapons shipments).

For now, the rest of the parties seem intent on maintaining the political 'firewall' around the AfD that has been in place since its founding in 2013. But beyond that (increasingly unsustainable) strategy, its opponents have made little headway in stopping its ascent. For months now, the parties of centre-right and centre-left, along with trade unions, churches, NGOs and the rest of civil society, have been organizing mass demonstrations across the country against the AfD's growing influence. Sparked by [revelations](#) about a closed-door meeting between party functionaries and far-right activists to discuss mass deportation scenarios, the demonstrations, which social movements scholar Dieter Rucht [described](#) as the largest concentrated protest wave in the history of the Federal Republic, initially seemed to deal a blow to the AfD's polling numbers, which have yet to return to their late-2023 highs. Yet the mobilizations had already been losing momentum for a number of months, long before failing to stop the AfD's electoral triumph on Sunday. So far, the shock does not seem to have lent them a new lease on life.

Meanwhile, the BSW has made major concessions to the right on questions of migration and asylum entitlements under the pretext of winning back voters from the AfD and presenting a credible alternative to both the open racism of the far right and the left's admittedly utopian promise of open borders, which few seem to want and even fewer seem to believe is possible. If this political pivot was intended to halt the growth of a grave threat, it increasingly feels like a darker turn, with Wagenknecht's rhetoric escalating in recent weeks to denunciations of 'uncontrolled violence' committed by foreigners, and descriptions of Germany's asylum seeker population as a 'ticking time bomb'.

This kind of talk unsurprisingly makes many on the left bristle, but has it at least succeeded in taking some wind out of the AfD's sails? Thus far, the answer seems to be no. The numbers of AfD

voters defecting to the BSW camp are still vanishingly small. Non-voters, another group Wagenknecht hopes to mobilize, have proven somewhat more receptive, but its primary base continues to be former Linke supporters, while the overall vote for ostensibly 'left-wing' parties has continued to decline. BSW therefore finds itself in the awkward position of negotiating with the CDU, of all parties, over forming coalitions in Thuringia and Saxony, where the AfD's strength and the collapse of the centre-left makes almost every other constellation impossible. This surely does not bode well for a project whose electoral fortunes have rested primarily on proclaiming its full-throated opposition to the entire political establishment. Nevertheless, the BSW was the other big winner of Sunday's elections. Even if it has so far failed to eat into the AfD's base, it looks set to become a significant force in the next federal parliament, due to be elected in autumn 2025. But given the volatility of the political landscape and the party's own idiosyncrasies, what kind of force it will be remains an open question.

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- NLR. Sidecar. 05 September 2024:  
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